California State Parks

Video Transcript

Carved In Silence

(abridged version)

NARRATOR: On May 1st, 1937, Mock Ging Sing caught his first glimpse of Gam Saan—Gold Mountain—America. He had left his home and family to find his dream in the New World. It was a modest dream—a job, enough money to send for his family, a home, and a safe place to watch his children grow. It was a dream not unlike that of millions of other immigrants pouring into America's eastern shore.

But Mock did not cross the Atlantic Ocean, he crossed the Pacific, leaving behind the political turmoil and grinding poverty of his native China. No Statue of Liberty welcomed him at the end of his journey. Instead he was taken to the Immigration Station on Angel Island in the middle of San Francisco Bay.

Here he would be detained for ten months. As was Yee Goon Kwan, who was detained for six months, and Lee Puey You for almost two years before she was deported. For them and thousands of others, Angel Island was a prison—a prison where people were confined for only one reason, being Chinese.

TRANSLATOR FOR MOCK GING SING: When it was time for me to leave, my grandmother saw me off herself. She said, I am seventy-five, I don't know if I will live long enough to see you come home. When I heard that, I felt so bad, my tears just started falling. I felt like throwing down my bags and running straight back to my house. Not come to America. But then I said to myself, 'I've got to think of my future.' So I made up my mind, and I came to this country.

TRANSLATOR FOR LEE PUEY YOU: Well, I saw how hard my brother worked. Just one job, trying to support me and my mother. It was barely enough. Finally I decided to listen to my mother. I would come to America first and then later help my brother and the rest of the family come also. That was what my mother had always wanted. Here there was a future. In China we were just too poor, and there was nothing we could do.

TRANSLATOR FOR YEE GOON KWAN: My life in China was not too bad, since my father was a merchant here. I came because he wanted me to get an education and to help him. But once I got to Angel Island, I felt the treatment was inhumane.

NARRATOR: In America, we call ourselves a nation of immigrants. Our popular history celebrates the ideal of opportunity for all in the great melting pot. But within this history, there is a chapter of shame. A period from 1882 to 1943 when systematic discrimination and

exclusion of Chinese people was the law of the land. Much of that chapter was written here, on Angel Island.

Like so many other immigrant groups, it was gold in California that first attracted large numbers of Chinese to America. Then during the nation's continuing westward expansion, the Chinese were seen as a cheap and reliable labor supply. They helped build the railroads, worked in the fields, and developed the commercial fishing industry.

For nearly three decades, the need for manpower kept America's doors open to the Chinese. But in the late 1870s a widespread depression gripped the nation. Intense competition for jobs led to increasing anti-Chinese sentiments. Fueled by the press and by American labor leaders, these sentiments led Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The law aimed at Chinese laborers marked the first time in American history that a group was forbidden entry to the United States solely on the basis of race.

America's immigration policies became progressively more restrictive. What began with the Chinese eventually included other groups from Asia, and finally Europeans. But all European immigrants were given the right to citizenship—a right that would be denied to Asians until the mid-twentieth century.

Still, the government's policies could not diminish the shiny appeal of America. Deteriorating political and economic conditions in China made more and more people desperate to escape. But because most Chinese did not fit within the narrow definitions of the exempt class, escape meant finding a way to circumvent America's policy of exclusion.

TRANSLATOR FOR MOCK GING SING: I wrote my father and asked him to find a way to bring me over to America. And my father managed to buy me a paper so I could come here.

TRANSLATOR FOR YEE GOON KWAN: My papers were all real. My father's name, everything. I never had to lie or to do anything like that.

NARRATOR: After crossing the Pacific Ocean, Chinese immigrants faced the most difficult part of their long journey—the last mile—the distance separating Angel Island from San Francisco, from America.

The immigrants could not know if they would leave the island in two days or two years. Their ordeal included a rigorous physical examination. But the most intimidating experience was the series of exhaustive interrogations conducted by immigration inspectors. The immigrants' performance in these interrogations would determine their fate.

ACTORS PORTRAYING INSPECTORS: What is your name? How many windows are there in your house? Where are the kitchens?

Z. B. JACKSON, FORMER INSPECTOR: China, in those years, had no records of births, marriages, death. If they did, they were not available to the people. And that fact, that you couldn't go back to a vital statistics record to determine whether one person was related to another, and of course the existing poverty in China, which would understandably impel any father to want to get his son out of there, one way or another, to a better place to live—that

brought about this system of comparing notes, to see if you were convinced that they had actually lived together in China.

[Actor portraying translator asks immigrant, in Chinese, to remove his hat]

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: What is your name?

[Translator translates question into Chinese, and immigrant responds in Chinese]

ACTOR PORTRAYING TRANSLATOR: My name is Si Yung.

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: How many windows are there in your house?

[Translator translates question into Chinese, and immigrant responds in Chinese]

ACTOR PORTRAYING TRANSLATOR: There are twelve.

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: How many houses in your row?

[Translator translates question into Chinese, and immigrant responds in Chinese]

ACTOR PORTRAYING TRANSLATOR: There are ten.

Z. B. JACKSON: And our job was to go over every minute detail of the history of an arriving child—where he lived, where he went to school—and compare what he said with what his father said . . .

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: Where does your oldest son sleep?

[Translator translates question into Chinese, and immigrant responds in Chinese]

ACTOR PORTRAYING TRANSLATOR: My oldest son sleeps near the large door.

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: Where do you sleep?

MAN'S VOICE, OFF CAMERA: Our daily schedule went something like this: Every morning around six or seven we got up. At eight we had breakfast—bread, butter, jam, and some saltine crackers. That was what we had. Then lunchtime we had rice, we had beef and vegetables all boiled together; sometimes salted fish, sometimes pickled cucumber. The food wasn't good, but since we didn't have anything else, we had to eat it, no matter how bad. At three in the afternoon we had coffee, bread, and crackers, with the usual butter and jam. Nighttime at around five or six, we had our evening meal. After dinner nothing else, and that was what our life was like.

TRANSLATOR FOR LEE PUEY YOU: Everyone was feeling low. We all suffered, emotionally. No one had any energy. We slept all day. So much mental anguish, you know, we cried more than anything else. It was hard. And time went by so slowly. One of the missionaries, a Miss Moore, I think, I don't remember exactly, she used to come once a week

and brought us some yarn and material to do knitting and sewing. That helped to break the monotony, a little.

TRANSLATOR FOR MOCK GING SING: Every night at ten they turned out the lights. There would be a guard posted to watch over us in case we ran away or somehow escaped from the island.

MAN'S VOICE, OFF CAMERA: Many people wrote poetry, but nobody ever signed his name. There were no signatures at all. I think there must have been eighty or ninety poems. Many were just carved deep into the wood with a knife.

TRANSLATOR READING POETRY: The west wind ruffles my thin, gauze clothing. On the hill sits a tall building with a room of wooden planks. I wish I could travel on a cloud far away and be with my wife and son. When the moonlight shines on me alone, the nights seem even longer. There is no flower beneath my pillow, and my dreams are not sweet.

NARRATOR: Ironically, a catastrophe created an unexpected opportunity for the Chinese. Virtually all of San Francisco's official archives, including birth records, no longer existed. Anyone could now claim to have been born in the city—a claim that brought instant American citizenship. For hundreds of Chinese immigrants, this was a godsend. Instant citizenship meant that they could now bring their families to join them. And because the American authorities had no way of knowing how large those families really were, a man could claim to have as many children as he wanted to.

This creation of paper children opened the way for a new wave of Chinese immigration. Before long, a complex network developed—a black market dealing in the documents which certified one's status as the son or daughter of a citizen. The papers were expensive, about one-hundred-dollars for each year of age stated on the paper. Poor families sometimes pooled their resources to send their brightest young men to the New World. The money bought not only the necessary documents, but also a coaching book containing information about the life of the person whose identity an immigrant would assume—details about their villages, families, friends, even pets.

TRANSLATOR FOR MOCK GING SING: The man who claimed me as his son, my 'paper father,' he told me that I would be interrogated for sure. He said, 'They will ask many, many questions. What? I don't know. You better memorize the coaching book well. If you don't, you'll make mistakes. And once you make mistakes, it's all over.'

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: How many houses are in your row?

[Translator speaks in Chinese]

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: How many feet is your house from the house next door?

[Translator speaks in Chinese]

Z. B. JACKSON: You know, we have two sons, and after I had been with Immigration for a while, the two boys lived in the same room, slept in the same room, and they were six years apart. And just as an experiment I got them one time and I got them outside and I asked them, How many windows are in your room? What type is the chandelier and where is the switch located? And, do you know, they would have failed. They didn't agree on the number of windows in their room. They didn't agree on the location of the furniture in their room, which is a small room. You're quite right, it was difficult, no matter how genuine the relationship was between the father here and the child coming in. You still had to run this gauntlet and you had to answer these questions and it was difficult to remember, for anyone.

NARRATOR: To protest the poor quality of their living conditions, male detainees formed the Angel Island Liberty Association in 1922. The most important function of the Association's officers was to help smuggle messages to detainees who were having difficulties in their interrogations. The messages were carried back and forth from San Francisco by the Chinese kitchen staff, who could leave the island on their days off.

Then, in Chinatown, they would pick up coaching notes from the relatives of detainees. A small fee would be paid for taking the messages back to the island.

MAN'S VOICE, OFF CAMERA: There were several officers of the organization, about six or seven of them, who always sat together at meals. When notes were smuggled in, the kitchen helpers serving the food might say casually, 'Here is the chicken dish,' or such-and-such a dish. And there would be a paper with the proper answers taped to the bottom of the plate. We would hide the paper and then smuggle it upstairs to the detainee.

ACTOR PORTRAYING INSPECTOR: In my opinion, the evidence of record does not satisfactorily establish the applicant is the son of Yee Yung Pang's claim. And it would appear that this visa was obtained by misrepresentation and should not be considered a valid visa. Commander Cole?

ACTOR PORTRAYING COMMANDER COLE: I second the motion.

FIRST ACTOR: Commander Walsh? . . .

TRANSLATOR READING POETRY: The ocean encircles a lone peak. Rough terrain surrounds this prison. There are few birds flying over the cold hills. The wild goose messenger cannot find its way. I have been detained, and obstacles have been put in my way for half a year. Now that I must return to my country, I have toiled like a *jingwei* bird in vain.

NARRATOR: Appeals could be made if the original application were denied, and the majority of them were successful. In case after case, the review board in Washington, D.C., found the questioning to have been unfair.

Running Time: 22 minutes